

Montana's African American Military History

The Buffalo Soldier Era

The African American military tradition reaches back to colonial times. However, as a matter of official recognition, the first detachment of all-black soldiers fought for the Union Army during the latter years of the Civil War.¹ Between 1866 and 1869, the newly constituted *United States Armed Forces* reconfigured the original companies into four military units—the 9th and 10th Calvary and the 24th and 25th Colored Infantry Regiments. Soon afterward they began their deployment in the American Southwest protecting westward moving settlers. Throughout the 1870s and 80s, in addition to their regular duties of manning forts and defending military outposts and frontier towns, the two infantry regiments performed public service jobs such as stringing telegraph wire across the vast expanse of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. In contrast, the 9th and 10th Calvary Regiments led far more exciting but dangerous lives, fighting the indigenous tribal peoples in all-out campaigns and brief skirmishes, earning them a certain amount of renown among recently established African American and White communities in the western territories.²

Beginning in the late 1880s, the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments gradually migrated north to the Dakotas and the Montana Territory.³ Over the next decade Forts Shaw, Maginnis, Custer, Keogh, Assiniboine, Harrison, and Missoula, became a temporary home for the Buffalo Soldiers. It was during this time that the 25th captured the American public's imagination as an experimental Bicycle division. Seeking to replace expensive horses with cheaper forms of transportation, the military personnel of the 25th performed patrols and other duties on two wheels. The experiment gained national attention when, in 1896, these African American cyclists embarked upon a remarkable journey from Missoula to St. Louis.⁴

In 1898 the Spanish-American War broke out on the island of Cuba marking a temporary end to the western deployment of the Buffalo Soldiers. All four regiments were redeployed to active combat duty. The 10th Calvary became renowned for its gallant charge up San Juan Hill alongside Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, while the other regiments equally distinguished themselves in less celebrated clashes with the enemy. In fact, both the 10th and the 24th played a significant role in the capture of San Juan Hill as well as in the Battle for *El Caney*.⁵ In the immediate aftermath of America's success in Cuba the Buffalo Soldiers were sent to repress guerilla fighters in the Philippines, a highly controversial campaign that would last for years.⁶ The wars in Cuba and the Philippines had a lasting impact on the shape of Montana's African American communities between 1904 and 1910. During this time, a number of the companies were stationed in Montana Forts between the first and second conflicts in the Philippines, the later taking place in 1906-1907. Not a few returned home from the harsh tropical conditions weary of both a war that was not their own and a government that required of them such great sacrifices. For these reasons, many black soldiers chose not to reenlist with the Army, and to pick up their civilian lives. A sizable number of black men in Montana from 1910 to 1920 decided to make the Big Sky their permanent home following the Spanish American and Philippines conflicts.

¹This was made possible by Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Soon afterwards the Massachusetts 54th regiment was formed as one of the first official black units. Although the Confederate Army would soon follow suit by enlisting and recognizing black soldiers among their ranks in the year 1865, their numbers never came close to matching the nearly 200,000 serving in the Union Army.

²Carroll details the duties of the Buffalo Soldiers, as well as descriptions of their individual experiences during this time by referencing dozens of articles, histories, and first-hand accounts (*The Black Military Experience in the American West* [New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971]).

³Lieutenant H. W. Hovey, "The Twenty-Fourth Regiment of Infantry," in *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, ed. John. M. Carroll (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971), 93.

⁴Fredrick Remington, "Vagabonding With the Tenth Horse," in *The Black Military Experience in the American West*, ed. John. M. Carroll (New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971), 166.

⁵"Spanish-American War: Battle of San Juan Hill," *History.Net*, last modified 6/12/2006, <http://www.historynet.com/spanish-american-war-battle-of-san-juan-hill.htm>

⁶"The Philippine War - A Conflict of Conscience for African Americans," *The National Parks Service*, <http://www.nps.gov/prsf/learn/historyculture/the-philippine-insurrectiothe-philippine-war-a-conflict-of-consciencen-a-war-of-controversy.htm>